DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 361 CS 214 365

AUTHOR McGuiness, Ilona M.
TITLE Rhetoric as Preventive Medicine: The Essays of E. M. Forster.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Essays; Higher Education; *Rhetorical Theory; Undergraduate Students; *Writing (Composition); Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse Communities; *Composition Theory; *Forster (E M); Loyola College MD; Montaigne (Michel Eyquem de); Woolf (Virginia)

ABSTRACT

Through the art of the essay, as conceived by E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and others, college readers and writers can play a role in the continual weaving of the fabric of civilization--not by delivering lessons, or sermons, or polemical arguments, but by participating in the essayistic dialogue about what comprises a healthy human community that began with Montaigne. Forster's essays affirm and demonstrate the importance of acknowledging that there are no easy solutions to most social problems, especially political ones. They can help the instructor show students that a paper does not have to be a finite gesture, a delusion that the writer has found the answer, the "only" answer. According to Forster, a sick society is one which settles for the comfort of definite answers, is afraid of open dialogue. At Loyola College, professors believe that if they bring students to an understanding of what it means to ask a question freely, think it through in the context of their curricular and extracurricular lives, and capture that process in a form and style that will interest readers and encourage them to respond to the question in their own ways, then they are giving students the necessary tools to tackle writing tasks across the curriculum. This assumes, of course, that the responsibility for introducing students to the discourse communities of the various academic disciplines lies with the faculty of those disciplines. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Rhetoric as Preventive Medicine:
The Essays of E. M. Forster

by

Ilona M. McGuiness

Loyola College in Maryland

ED 371 361

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
I.M. McGuiness
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

E. M. Forster once wrote, "Everything depends on the good things you want to make happen. They must be good things ---- And if you make them good things always, the time will come when there won't be any others" (Commonplace Book 176). There has been much discussion in our profession lately about the "good things" we think should happen in our writing classrooms. In a recent article in The New York Times Joshua Mills echoes some of the questions we're asking ourselves: "So should writing teachers start by helping students to find their voice? Or by helping them to shape the words into the standard vehicles of academic discourse, like a term paper or a laboratory report?" (19). In the October 1993 College English Alan France calls for a pedagogy which will "clear the ground for a third rhetorical position from which writing might become an active means to transform the existing social inequities of commodity capitalism" (593). And Louise Wetherbee Phelps, in Profession 93, doubts that "writing classrooms could or should be apolitical," but, concerned, lest the writing classroom become a forum for political rhetoric of the individual professor's choosing, she calls for "an ethic of

CS214365

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

our politics" (47) to ensure that students have "access to competing views" and "to make possible other interpretations besides 'the political'". I would like to suggest that teaching the genre of the essay in freshman writing courses, as we do in Writing and Media Department at Loyola College in Maryland, can help us achieve our individual goals without losing sight of our common mission--helping young writers whose political orientations are as varied as their fields of study become strong-voiced individuals who possess the ability to pursue their own ideas intelligently and gracefully.

A study of the essay, as Kurt Spellmeyer has told us, can be the basis for a pedagogy that opens out rather than closes in options for classroom and textual dialogue. By engaging students in essay writing as opposed to creating texts in response to a particular political pedagogy, we are not necessarily reinforcing the social alienation that Alan France fears expressive writing encourages. Quite the contrary, because one of the characteristics of the true essay is that it requires its authors to take their place in the cultural conversation of the times. The essay writer is forced to move beyond the simplistic notion of the autonomous self because a primary characteristic of the essay is the recognition of the author's own voice as one among many in the act of cultural exchange. The writer's biographical self is the first audience for the essayistic voice. Recognizing this is a student's first step beyond the developmental stage of expressive writing. I think if we look to this and other

features of the genre of the essay as the subject for analysis in our classes, we will move students toward an examination of language acts which make political as well as other kinds of dialogue between reader and writer possible. It will, I think, help students to do what Virginia Woolf reminds us in "The Modern Essay" writers must do-- that is, to "think" their "own thoughts" (The Common Reader 220).

In my beginning writing courses I take my cue from Woolf's contemporary, E. M. Forster. Forster's essays are intensely personal--yet they are at the same time public and grounded in the social context of his lived world; they are vehicles by which he brings himself and his readers to conscious assessment of the world around them and to active questioning of their personal roles in shaping and perpetuating the values governing that world. His essays allow a dialogue in which ideas are formed, tested, and stretched by both the authorial voice in the text and the audience reading the text. In short, they are expempla for the kind of dialogue which turns the classroom into an arena for the exploration, testing, and expression of independent thought.

Forster used the familiar essay to create a rhetoric that makes the act of essaying an active interchange between reader and writer. His texts persistently ask readers to take a position on the issues under discussion, though not necessarily his own. Forster's art of essaying consistently leads himself and his readers toward new questions about and insights on what constitutes civilization. Whether his particular subject is

personal relationships, art, politics, literature, or travel, Forster draws us to a conscious consideration of our shared responsibility in what he calls "the domain of conduct." One aspect of that responsibility, he says in "Notes on the English Character," is to make certain that we recognize that "no national character is complete," and that "nations must learn to understand one another" (Abinger Harvest, 15). I think we can narrow "nations" down to mean large and small groups of all kinds, including those that make up a composition class. It is art, the activity "that brought man out of original darkness," which Forster believes to have the power to bring individuals to an understanding of each other--and to a recognition of and dialogue on our misunderstandings. Art, Forster says, has to do with order," with wholeness, with keeping individual citizens from becoming "moral consumptives," and societies from becoming collections of people with "undeveloped hearts." Through the art of the essay, as Forster's work illustrates, readers and writers can play a role in the continual weaving of the fabric of civilization--not by delivering lessons, or sermons, or polemical arguments, but by participating in the essayistic dialogue that began with Montaigne about what comprises a healthy human community.

The essay, Forster's friend Virginia Woolf has told us, challenges the "soul, or life within us" ("Montaigne," The Common Reader 61). "If one has the courage to ask her [the soul] what she thinks, she is always saying the very opposite to what other

people say," Woolf contends. Thus, the essay by its very nature challenges what Woolf calls "convention and ceremony." That often anthologized essay of Forster's, "My Wood," serves as a good example. Like many of his essays, it shows how political questions can be explored in non-directive ways. It illustrates Forster own struggle with his dependence on capitalism and simultaneous attraction to and fear of communism. "My Wood" demonstrates Forster's ability to examine his own values and to bring his readers to examine theirs. It exemplifies the kind of free exploration of political options he claims writers must engage in if they are to contribute to building a healthy national culture. In "Three Anti-Nazi Broadcasts" he puts it this way. The writer

> must have an audience , he must express his feelings, and if he knows he may be forbidden to express himself, he becomes afraid to feel. . . . The public, on its side, must be free to read, to listen, to look. If it is prevented from receiving the communications which the artist sends, it becomes inhibited like him, though in a different way: it remains immature. Only people who have been allowed to practice freedom can have the grown-up look in their eye. (Two Cheers for Democracy 33)

Of course Forster is talking in part about active governmental censorship here, but he is also talking about the general impulse to direct the thinking of individuals in the service of political

agendas. In this same essay he says "When writers. . . feel easy, when they express themselves openly, when their public is allowed to receive their communications, there is a chance of the general level of civilization rising" (33).

I need to bring this back to the specific realm of the writing classroom at this point. As I mentioned earlier, at Loyola College, our freshman composition course is a course in the art of essay writing. We believe that if we bring students to an understanding of what it means to ask a question freely, think it through in the context of their curricular and extra-curricular lives, and capture that process in a form and style that will interest readers and encourage them to respond to the question in their own ways, then we are giving students them the necessary tools to tackle writing tasks across the curriculum. This assumes, of course, that the responsibility for introducing students to the discourse communities of the various academic disciplines lies with the faculty of those disciplines. At Loyola the academic departments accept that responsibility.

In my freshman writing course, students often choose to write about social issues. And, like many young writers, they sometimes respond to readings and write papers out of prejudices, stereotypes, received opinions, and the limitations of knowledge that they bring to the classroom with them. But I fear that if I try to change their views by presenting a course of instruction explicitly designed to reshape their social and political beliefs, or if I adopt a course of instruction based on my

particular political views, I risk giving students the impression that there is one approach or one kind of answer which will please me. And then I would discourage the kind of independent thinking upon which all good writing is based.

Forster's essays affirm and demonstrate the importance of acknowledging that there are no easy solutions to most social problems, especially political ones. They help me illustrate for students how writing can be an opening out of the thought process. The help me show them that a paper does not have to be a finite gesture, a fooling of oneself into thinking one has found the answer by making a statement in response to someone else's question. According to Forster, a sick society is one which settles for the comfort of definite answers, is afraid of open dialogue, is nervous about not knowing the answer. The genre of the essay, because its very nature requires the personal voice to look outward from the self and takes its position in a community of selves, is a vehicle by which we can bring students to confront their own beliefs, to think them through, and present them in a form which will make readers consider those beliefs thoughtfully. This means students must clarify for themselves why they think as they do, and I, as their instructor, must be comfortable with responding to papers which go against my own values. If I, in my role as teacher, help students to become, as Virginia Woolf says writers must be, "aware" of themselves, then I have a better chance of helping them become, as she puts it "henceforward independent." ("Montaigne," Common Reader 62).

At this point you may be wondering where rhetoric fits into all of this. Well, a study of Forster's--or any good writer's--essayistic strategies can illustrate how schemes and tropes can help both writer and reader engage in the collaborative exploration of ideas. Studying how Forster's authorial stance looks outward rather than inward, studying how he uses humor to cajole readers into questioning the role popular culture plays in their lives, studying how he uses metaphor to surprise readers into understanding new concepts, how he uses satire to distance himself and his readers from values he wants to explore, how he uses shifts in point of view to draw readers into a collaborative stance with his authorial voice, how he uses shifts in modality to soften an unpopular or uncomfortable argument, how he posits questions to both the authorial voice and his readers and leaves the answer for the reader to give--these are just a few of the rhetorical devices students can analyze for their affective powers. I am using Forster as an example here. Other essayists provide their own lessons in how to think, how to express thought, and how to connect with an audience--lessons students can draw upon as they pursue their own ideas in their own individual writing projects.

In "The Challenge of Our Time" Forster warned that "the doctrine of <u>laissez-faire</u> is the only one that seems to work in the world of the spirit; if you plan and control men's minds, you stunt them, you get censorship, the secret police, the road to serfdom, the community of the slave. . . . we want planning for

the body, not the spirit" (Two Cheers for Democracy 57). And he says, "The Saviour of the future, if he ever comes--will not preach a new gospel. . . he will make effective the good will and the good temper which are already existing" (Two Cheers for Democracy 75). Forster's mission as a writer was to consider whether or not his actions were governed by goodwill and to bring readers to ask themselves that same question. Forster, like his fellow Cambridgean, the philosopher/rhetorician I.A. Richards, believed that attention to the affective properties of language itself helps move writers and readers in that direction. He, like Richards, recognized education's responsibility to make students aware that thinking, and the expression of thought, are processes of making conscious independent choices.

In A Philosophy of Rhetoric, Richards tells us that "A discussion of the reasons for the choice of words--which too often seems a trivial exchange of whimsies--can become an introduction to the theory of all choices. The art of so transforming it from a tea-table topic into the central discipline of education waits to be rediscovered, but the better we understand what place words hold in our lives the readier we shall be to admit that to think about their choice is the most convenient mode of thinking about the principle of all choices" (3). I think that unless we keep the focus of our instruction on language, on helping students articulate why they choose to say what they say in the way they say it, on helping them discover that knowing how to use language can actually help them clarify

their thinking, we risk turning them into the kind of writer Forster claims the historian Edward Gibbon was at his worst--a writer who "insists on our hearing what he says to us until we long for a chance of hearing what he says to himself" (121). In other words, writers with false voices. By prescribing a particular political approach in the writing classroom, we risk encouraging the development of false voices in students who seek to give us what they think we might approve of rather than what they need to say. By allowing students to frame their own questions and write out of their own convictions, all the while asking them to confront the language in which they do this, to acknowledge the stance from which they speak and the audience to which they speak, I think we will not only empower students to think for themselves but also bring them to a better understanding of their own selves and to a clarification, perhaps even a reassessment, of their own values. If Forster's comrade in letters, Virginia Woolf, is right, that is all we need to do. Again writing about Montaigne, she says "Communication is health, communication is truth, communication is happiness. To share is our duty; to go down boldly and bring to light those thoughts which are diseased; to conceal nothing; to pretend nothing; if we are ignorant to say so; if we love our friends to let them know it." If Woolf is right, teaching the essay could well be a healing agent for the division we face in composition studies. And it could be preventive medicine for students, because by its very nature the essay channels students away from the unhealthy

"supply side conformity" they slip into all too often. And that is one of the good things we all want to see happen.

Works Cited

Forster, E. M. Abinger Harvest. New York: Harcourt, Brace/Harvest, 1936.

_____. Commonplace Book. Philip Gardner, ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1985.

_____. Two Cheers for Democracy. New York: Harcourt, Brace/Harvest, 1951.

France, Alan. "Assigning Places: Introductory Composition as a Cultural Discourse. College English 55 (1993): 593-609.

Mills, Joshua. "In-Your-Faceism vs. Light." The New York Times 9 Jan. 1994, natl. ed. Special Supplement: Education Life, sec. 4A: 19-20.

Phelps, Louise Wetherbee. "A Constrained Vision of the Writing Classroom." Profession 93: 46-54.

Richards, I.A. The Philosophy of Rhetoric. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1936.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. "A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy." College English 51 (1989): 262-76.

Woolf, Virginia. The Common Reader. New York: Harcourt, Brace/Harvest, 1925.